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SUBJECT: LIBERIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM: SUPPORT BY RADIO CHINA  
INTERNATIONAL

¶1. (SBU) Summary: John Langlois, Senior Media Advisor for USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) visited Liberia from February 28 - March 21, 2007. The purpose of his visit was to follow up on OTI media-related activities and to assess OTI's media strategy in light of new Chinese involvement in the sector.

¶2. (SBU) Background: In mid-2006, USAID/OTI provided over \$35,000 in studio and broadcasting equipment to the Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS), and specifically to its radio service, known as ELBC FM. The materials restored minimum capabilities to ELBC for basic radio coverage of government activities and events. The decision to provide studio and outside broadcasting equipment was in part based on political transition needs. USAID and other donors have been working closely with the Government of Liberia (GOL) to enhance its capacity to govern the country. Public expectations and need for coverage of government decisions and activities, combined with a public that still trusts the national broadcaster to provide much of this type of information, created the basis for the assistance provided. Operationally, the LBS radio service and its Director General provided key support to early GOL, USG and international community priorities as it worked to publicize and promote the re-electrification of Monrovia.

¶3. (U) USAID/OTI began working to build a national network of public service oriented radio stations in late 2006, focusing on independent Star Radio in Monrovia and selected small, community oriented radio stations located in major towns outside the capital. Star Radio is a non-profit, news oriented radio station initially established through USAID and the work of Swiss NGO Fondation Hirondelle to support the Presidential election process in 1997. The station was shut down by Charles Taylor's government in 2000, but was reestablished with European donor funds in 2004. Most of the rural, community radio stations now operating in Liberia were created through a USAID supported program began in 2003.

¶4. (U) USAID/OTI is working with Star Radio and six priority community radio stations to help the rural stations provide superior local news and programming in addition to a real time, networked news operation that will allow the rural stations to broadcast news and other programs live from Star at times throughout the day. The system will be the first true affiliate radio network to exist in Liberia, either pre or post-war.

¶5. (U) The affiliate network stations currently receiving support through the grant to Star Radio include: Radio Bomi 98.9 FM - Tubmanburg, Bomi County; Radio Gbarnga 96.5 FM - Gbarnga, Bong County; Radio Gbezohn 106.3 FM - Buchanan, Grand Bassa County; Radio Harper 89.8 FM - Harper, Maryland County; Smile FM 98.6 FM - Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County; and Radio Voinjama 93.5 FM - Voinjama, Lofa County.

¶16. (SBU) Chinese Media Sector Support: According to Charles Snetter, the Director General of the Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS), the GOL and People's Republic of China (PRC) signed an agreement in Beijing during the November 2006 state visit of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf for the operation of Radio China International (RCI) on FM in 7 cities in Liberia. RCI will provide upgrades to the operation of LBS as part of the agreement. As reported by Snetter, the following will be installed, beginning in April 2007: two 10kW FM transmitters (one RCI relay and ELBC-FM) in Monrovia, and twelve 1.5 kW FM transmitters (six RCI relay and six ELBC-FM) in Tubmanburg, Gbarnga, Voinjama, Zwedru, Harper, and Buchanan.

¶17. (U) At each site, a generator with possible backup generator sets will be installed to power the transmitters and all supporting equipment including satellite relay equipment. RCI will relay ELBC programming via satellite in addition to the RCI program stream.

¶18. (SBU) This will be the first time that RCI has broadcast in Liberia, and the first time any international service will be broadcast on dedicated transmitters outside of Monrovia. Some international services have been available on dedicated transmitters in Monrovia, and the BBC established an affiliate broadcaster in Buchanan.

¶19. (SBU) The genesis of this arrangement was the visit by the Chinese Ambassador to Liberia to the studios and transmitter facilities of LBS in Paynesville, Liberia. The Chinese Ambassador noted the presence of FM transmitters for Radio France International and the BBC and inquired whether the RCI would also be welcome. An RCI technical team was sent to Liberia following the visit to LBS by the Ambassador, and as reported by Snetter, an agreement for the Liberian President's signature was presented during her state visit in November 2006.

¶110. (SBU) The estimated value of all installed equipment through RCI will be \$54 million yuan, or roughly \$7 million USD.

¶111. (SBU) Analysis: While FM radio stations broadcast in Monrovia and on low power outside the capital, with the exception of UNMIL Radio, there is no national retransmission or network of FM stations. The new Chinese support to ELBC promises to provide the national broadcaster real national coverage, but will do so through a system of repeater transmitters that only rebroadcast the program stream produced in Monrovia.

¶112. (SBU) While this OTI supported program to assist local broadcasting in Liberia was established to provide independent, national coverage of Liberia's rebuilding process, it will have the effect of also providing some balance to the initiative of the Chinese to create RCI presence and ELBC presence throughout the country. Because the USAID effort relies on local radio stations that are fully integrated and supported within their communities, despite the fact that Chinese assistance will vastly exceed USAID investments, it is believed that the Star programming and its affiliates will provide effective competition to RCI and ELBC in all the towns in which they will be operating.

¶113. (SBU) Follow-up actions: USAID/OTI has not elected at this time to provide any additional support to LBS, especially with the new Chinese support forthcoming. However, LBS Director General Charles Snetter, who is a US citizen, remains a close point of contact to USAID/OTI staff and is considered very supportive to US interests.

¶114. (U) In terms of the affiliate network of independent community radio stations, Star Radio staff have provided training and maintenance support to three of the radio stations, and have installed new equipment at Radio Gbezohn in Buchanan. Equipment installation will proceed in Gbarnga and Tubmanburg in April and formal association through a structured memorandum of understanding between Star and the community stations in Harper, Voinjama, and Zwedru will take place in May. OTI has provided support to Star Radio to move to a more cost-effective location in order to promote longer term sustainability of the studio and affiliate network, and equipment procurement for the stations in Harper, Voinjama and Zwedru is underway.